
INDONESIAN INTO JAPANESE: AN INTERVIEW WITH NORIAKI OSHIKAWA

interview by Shinji Yamashita
and James Siegel

The following interview was conducted by Shinji Yamashita and myself in English with Noriaki Oshikawa on May 29, 1997. Oshikawa is the foremost translator of Indonesian writing into Japanese. He was one of a group of people who were student radicals in the 1960s and who followed the reading group led by the historian Tsuchiya Kenji. These people form the core of Indonesianists of their generation in Japan, with the exception of the anthropologists who were not part of the group. I found Oshikawa's remarks interesting for the glimpse they offer of the history of Indonesian studies in Japan, showing the impulse that led people to Indonesia. One can also get something of the present day ambience of Japanese studies of Indonesia. But I found it particularly interesting to listen to Oshikawa on the subject of translation. It is clear that he is compelled to translate. This being the case, we see something of the position of Japanese in respect to Indonesian. There is something in the language that is missing in Japanese and that makes Oshikawa want to find it and bring it into his language.

I have also lightly edited the English in places, and Noriaki Oshikawa was given the opportunity to review the transcript. We thank Jane Workman of BEST Translation Services for her dedication in transcribing the tape. J.S.

Oshikawa: I was born in Kyushu, Miyazaki-ken, in the southern part of Japan. I came up to Tokyo in 1966 at Waseda University to study Russian Literature. At that time, the student movement against raising the college fees was at its peak at Waseda University so there were almost no lectures at the university. I was disappointed, and the next

year I changed school to Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. Ironically enough, there I was involved with the student movement, 1968-69, when the so-called “great student uprising” was at its peak in Japan. As a result, I spent eight years for an undergraduate course. Then I met with Kenji Tsuchiya.

Siegel: What year was that?

Oshikawa: 1973, one year before he went to Kyoto. He came to Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, as a part-time lecturer, to teach Indonesian history. I attended the class. Before meeting Kenji, I had no interest in academics or study. I was absent, and active outside the college. If I didn’t go back to the university, I would be thrown out, yeah? So I went back, and then I met Kenji Tsuchiya. From the first lesson—still I remember clearly his excellent description of *wayang kulit*—I was attracted to him and to Indonesian studies, so I started again eagerly studying Bahasa Indonesia [Indonesian]. Kenji lent me Tan Malaka’s pamphlets “Massa-aksi” and “Menuju ke Republik Indonesia,” encouraging me to read them. These two books were my first translations in 1975. But these translations were published under the name of Ryoichi Hino, my pen-name, because I didn’t know exactly what Tan Malaka’s position was in New Order Indonesia.

About Pramoedya, for the Japanese branch of Amnesty International, at the time Pram was on the island of Buru [where the Indonesian government imprisoned political captives taken after 1965], so we had a meeting to encourage him. For that meeting I translated his short story “Blora” from his anthology, *Subuh*, and this story was read at the meeting. It was the first time I translated his work. After that I translated other works of Pram, Mochtar Lubis, Tan Malaka, Idrus, and so on [at this point Oshikawa mentioned several more of his translations. A list, furnished by him, is appended to this interview.]

Siegel: It’s quite a list because, for one thing, it’s by no means limited by politics. It’s across the political spectrum. Mochtar Lubis as well as Pramoedya. So how is it you choose what to translate? How do you decide what you’re going to translate? Pramoedya you translated for a political reason. Then Mochtar Lubis . . .

Oshikawa: As for Mochtar Lubis, I was asked by a publishing company, Mekong Publishing Co. At that time, I had a subsidy from the Toyota Foundation, so there was some list of books for us to translate. The Indonesian works for translation were selected and arranged by the committee organized for that translation program, consisting of Indonesian and Japanese scholars. Prof. Akira Nagazumi was then one of the committee members. The translation program by the Toyota Foundation covered other Southeast Asian countries, like Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, the Philippines, and so on. Without the subsidy from the Foundation, almost no publishers would have run the risk of publishing Southeast Asian literatures. As for Pram, we got a subsidy to publish his *Keluarga Gerilya*, but after that his name was deleted from the list. I don’t know why, but most likely for political reasons.

Siegel: What I’d like to know some more about is your interest in literature. You were interested in literature before you were interested in Indonesian literature, your first thought was to study Russian literature. Can you tell us something about how your interest in literature itself developed? When did you become interested in literature? When you were small?

Oshikawa: Yes. When I was a senior high school student . . . I had my first encounter with Dostoyevski. The translator was Masao Yonekawa. He was a very famous translator and also professor of Russian Literature at Waseda University, so I wanted to come up to Tokyo to study at Waseda. At that time, unfortunately, I lived in a small town.

Siegel: Which town?

Oshikawa: Kawaminami, Miyazaki-Prefecture. My town was known as the birthplace of Japanese paratroops. In the neighboring area of my junior high school, there was a vast, deserted site used by the paratroops, which had attacked the oil stations in Palembang. Just behind my house in Kawaminami, there stands a big stone monument for it. When I was a high school student, we had no bookstore in my town, so I borrowed some books from the school library . . . a very, very small, library. There were translations of Russian literature. Well, I didn't like economics and politics. First of all I wanted to escape from my community.

Siegel: For the same reasons everybody wants to leave town, or for special reasons? Are you saying that literature, or just literature, was already an escape?

Oshikawa: Yes.

Siegel: So the attraction to literature was in order not to be there, where you found the books.

Yamashita: Why did you want to escape from your village? Was it for the wider world?

Oshikawa: Yes, for the wider world. I'd never been out of Kyushu, except when I was four or five years old, once I went to Hiroshima. At the age of eighteen, I first went out of my community. When I was in the third grade of senior high school, all of us went to Tokyo and Osaka on a school excursion, but I didn't go along. I explained my future because after all I wanted to go to Tokyo. Immediately after final exams of high school were over, with a friend of mine I got on the train for Tokyo. We didn't attend the graduation ceremony. I remember it took almost twenty-four hours to Tokyo. At the Tokyo station we parted, my friend entered Keio University and I entered Waseda, but since then we have never met again. Anyway I wanted to escape.

Siegel: You wanted to escape, and yet you didn't want to go with everyone else to Tokyo. Is that a contradiction, or is what you wanted to escape the people going to Tokyo?

Yamashita: I was also born in a local town, Shimonoseki, at the western tip of Honshu island. When I was an elementary school child, there was a movie directed by Shohei Imamaru called "Miyaru-chan." Have you seen it?

Oshikawa: Yes.

Yamashita: That is a story about a Kyushu-born Korean boy who wanted to go to Tokyo, and he just got on the train. I had great sympathy with that. Tokyo provided a dream to escape from the narrow local world.

Oshikawa: When I left my hometown, my mother said to me, "Never climb mountains, and never join a student movement, because it's so dangerous." It's the first promise. But I came here, I climbed mountains and . . .

Siegel: And joined the student movement.

Yamashita: What was the difference? Did your parents ban literature too?

Oshikawa: My parents were married in Manchuria, and after the war they returned home with almost nothing. Of course they had no books, no paper culture. I think they didn't understand what literature was like.

Siegel: If I could ask you once again, why didn't you want to go with the other students to Tokyo and Osaka? When you could have gone, you didn't go. I was just wondering why. Okay, you don't have to answer.

There is something else I want to ask you about that you mentioned because you may not appreciate how well known you are in certain circles in America. . . . The thing I know in English of yours in the famous piece on Tan Malaka and the *roman picisan* [dime novel].¹ Of course, that's quite important. It started off a kind of minor trend that I followed, too. But the reason that you're well-known is because you're well-known by word of mouth. It comes out of the circle around Kenji Tsuchiya. I remember very well Kenji telling me about you, and I remember Takashi Shiraishi, telling me about you and telling me about the people around Kenji and how important they were in the development of Indonesian studies. So I want to ask you whether you could talk some more about the influence of Kenji and how that affected you. You already told us how it is that, when you had to go back to school, suddenly it worked, because you wanted to go back to school, once you started studying with Kenji again. What was there about Kenji that was so, so remarkable.

Oshikawa: I wrote a short essay in the memorial book of Kenji Tsuchiya. I think the important thing is . . . I can't explain exactly but some kind of smell of intelligence of Kenji's, including his own character. Of course, his was a very insightful intelligence. He always encouraged me. After he went to Kyoto, he so often wrote to me, and also from Jakarta or Bangkok, Hague. His letters are my most valuable treasures. I don't know why he was so much interested in me. When we first met, he invited me to eat lunch. We ate Japanese noodles and [he invited me] to attend a small circle, which we began to attend . . .

Yamashita: In 1972, '73? [The workshop had started in 1970.]

Oshikawa: I attended only one year with Kenji.

Siegel: Also who was there besides you and Kenji?

Yamashita: Kano-san? [Professor Hiroyoshi Kano from the Oriental Institute, Tokyo University]

Oshikawa: Yes. [Masaya Shiraishi, Aiko Kurasawa, Takashi Shiraishi, Saya Sasaki (Shiraishi), later Kanichi Gotoh, Akira Ohki, Yoshinori Murai and others also joined.]

¹ See Noriaki Oshikawa, "*Patjar Merah Indonesia* and Tan Malakka: A Popular Novel and a Revolutionary Legend," in Takashi Shiraishi, ed., *Reading Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia 1990), pp. 9-40.

Yamashita: Takashi Shiraishi was still an undergraduate student when he joined the workshop for the first time. I was with him, you know, in the grade at the University of Tokyo. I was in anthropology while he was in international relations, and we shared some classes. When I met him for the first time, he was writing on Indonesia as a BA thesis. At that time I was never interested in Indonesia. I remember I asked him, "Is Indonesia interesting?" He said "Yes." He was perhaps also influenced by Kenji.

Siegel: I think so. That's what he said, anyway. That's what I remember him telling me.

[...]

Oshikawa: Almost all the students of my generation were in the workshop.

Yamashita: What was the topic?

Oshikawa: Oh, so many topics, on politics, history, cultures. There I first met Aiko Kurasawa, Takashi Shiraishi, Saya Shiraishi, Kenichi Goto. Kurasawa-san was already studying the Japanese Occupation.

Yamashita: How about Professor Nagazumi?

Oshikawa: At that time Nagazumi-sensei was already an established scholar. He is the older generation, and we are the second or the third generation.

Siegel: The most fruitful generation. It's interesting, because, not that I can know for sure since I don't know Japanese, of course, but if you look and see what was done in your generation as opposed to what was done before, and what is apparently being done after, much more was done then, in your generation. There was a peculiar mix of certain things, it seems to me at least. The politics of the times, the student movement, with the involvement of so many of you, which colored the interest in Indonesia in some way; the central role of Kenji and probably other things. But one can't say there's any commonality of topics outside of Indonesia itself, and no common approach. Each of you does things differently. And maybe that's the influence of Kenji, too. I don't know. Apparently, before you joined it, in the midst of all the student politics, this group was already going on. It started in '66.

Oshikawa: The thing I can say about the workshop that Kenji had, which topic we chose was influenced by the movement.

Yamashita: That was not the case with me. I was also involved in the student movement, but I decided to study anthropology to part from politics, so I came to meet Indonesian politics after I did fieldwork in Toraja.

Siegel: I think that's true of anthropology. Anthropology is popular either in conservative times or when people have a conservative impulse. Because it's something else. It's apart, and one of the symptoms of changing times is in fact when people get interested in anthropology again, because it means they can't bear it here. So they want someplace else.

Yamashita: Sekimoto, too, didn't involve himself in Kenji's workshop. We were not particularly interested in Indonesia at our undergraduate days. So I met with Kenji and Kano in Indonesia, not Japan. And after I came back from Indonesia, there was a workshop that was organized by Kano at Ajia Keizai Kenkyusho [The Institute of

Development Economy], where I met with Tsuyoshi Kato when he made a presentation just after his return from the United States. And I met you then and I remember you said "I'm going to study Indonesian literature."

Oshikawa: Part of the reason why I chose Indonesian culture, not history or politics, was at the time I couldn't go to Indonesia for various reasons. If we have books, we can read in Japan.

Siegel: When did you finally go to Indonesia?

Oshikawa: 1977. At that time Kano-san was staying in Yogyakarta and doing his research in the rural areas of Central Java. He introduced me to one boardinghouse in Jalan Cik Ditiro, near Gajah Mada University. It happened Kenji Tsuchiya had stayed there for one year while he was in Yogya in 1969. I stayed in the boardinghouse about one month. Pramoedya was then still on the island of Buru. I first met him on my second visit to Indonesia in 1988.

Siegel: Did you learn anything from meeting with him? What was the result of your meeting with Pramoedya? When you met Pramoedya, what was the effect? Did it help you in his translation? What was your impression? [. . .]

Oshikawa: Yes, he said I was much more younger than he thought, as if his own son, because I was then thirty-nine or forty. The meeting was very impressive. He embraced me, and I cried, yeah, I couldn't say almost anything. He asked me to go to Blora and stay with his sister. So I went to Blora.

Siegel: Was Blora the way you imagined it?

Oshikawa: Yeah, just like the *Tjerita dari Blora* [Stories from Blora]. I walked along the riverside of Kali Lusi and went to a teak forest, a railway station, his father's school building.

Siegel: What has been the reception of the translations of Pramoedya? Especially which ones?

Oshikawa: *Bumi Manusia* [This Earth of Mankind]. There is already a fifth edition.

Siegel: Fifth edition?

Oshikawa: Yes. I don't know exact numbers, but each edition is probably one thousand copies. The name of Pramoedya is most popular with Japanese readers. Last March I went to Jakarta and met some Japanese people staying there. Among the businessmen, they also read *Bumi Manusia* and *Anak Semua Bangsa* [Child of all Nations] in my translation.

Siegel: Did that surprise you?

Oshikawa: Yes. They urged me to complete the translation of the Buru quartet. One person, who is a former branch manager of a big Japanese bank in Jakarta, after he returned here, wrote to me and said that reading Pram's books in translation was one of his most impressive experiences in Indonesia.

Siegel: Are there any other Indonesian writers who are received in the same way as Pramoedya, on a wide scale, among the people you translate?

Oshikawa: No. Mochtar Lubis and Yudhistira are also read, but in a minor way.

Yamashita: Is there any response from the younger generation in Japan?

Oshikawa: The younger generation has little interest in literature. They don't read even Japanese literature. When Kenzaburo Oe won the Nobel Prize for literature, a TV crew interviewed the students of Tokyo University. Among forty students, the brightest ones in Japan, there were only two or three that had read his novels.

Siegel: Have you done more critical writing yourself along the lines of what you did on *Patjar Merah*?

Oshikawa: After *Patjar Merah Indonesia*, I wrote an essay about how Daniel Defoe's novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, was translated into the Malay language. The essay has two points. First, how was the Malay abridged version of 1875 translated; what was omitted or added, how it differs from Defoe's original text. Second, it discusses the narrative style. The Malay version has some substantial differences in the description of Robinson's character and the social, historical background of the story. And, the narrative style is also changed from the first-person into the third-person style. This occurs mainly because the Malay version is written in the form of *hikayat*, the traditional narrative of the Malay world, unfamiliar with the first-person style. But the language itself is very modern, or artificial, Malay compared with the colloquial Malay of the time. I suppose the Malay's *Robinson Crusoe* was recited by school teachers to the class. Anyway, it was an ideal text to be introduced into the colonial society. After that, on the *nyai* stories. I'm checking whether the *nyai* stories were influenced by Defoe's other stories like *Moll Flanders*, a story of a criminal woman, if *Moll Flanders* was introduced in the Netherlands Indies.

Siegel: (Who) besides yourself translates and writes critical essays in Japanese that we who don't know Japanese should know about?

Oshikawa: Translations by some people; women translators.

Yamashita: Are they all from Tokyo University of Foreign Studies?

Oshikawa: No. They are almost self-taught. One person is Megumi Funachi. Her case is interesting. Funachi, now seventy years old, came to Jakarta with her husband, a Japanese businessman who stayed in Jakarta. There she began to learn the Indonesian language at the age of nearly fifty. Funachi is a poet in her own right. Her best works are the translations of Chairil Anwar and Amir Hamzah. Excellent translations. Another woman is Shinobu Yamane who translated Ahmad Tohari. Her career is almost the same as Funachi's. They received Indonesian language training outside the college in Japan. Tokyo University of Foreign Studies has produced almost no translators of Indonesian. These two women don't work for the university, not for scholarly purposes, but they are not at all amateurs. They're . . .

Siegel: Professionals.

Yamashita: But not academicians.

Oshikawa: Yes.

Siegel: They're professional writers.

Oshikawa: No, professional translators.

Siegel: No.

Oshikawa: We can't live by translation.

Siegel: But I didn't quite understand. These women are not amateurs, you say.

Oshikawa: I mean they're not amateurs in their works. They're professionals in their works. Their translations and their Japanese are excellent.

Siegel: I see. Then the translations they make, like most of the translations you make, have, you might say, a small, popular audience. They're not meant simply for people interested in Indonesia, like we are for some professional reason, or because of some lifelong interest in the place. It's for some other reason, like they'll read anything. For instance in the bookstore, you look for something interesting, you might well read one of these translations. Can you follow what I'm saying? When women like these make these translations, they make them with an audience in mind that doesn't include Yamashita-san, that is to say they're not made for an academic audience. They are made for a popular audience of some kind.

Oshikawa: I think so.

Siegel: When these people make translations, who do they think will read them? These women who have excellent Japanese and are good translators . . . I mean it's surprising to find people like that in the university. When you find them, you think they are there so that they fulfill the mission of the university, which is to make things known, for the archives as it were. I mean most translations that are made, they're made to be put in a library, rather than made to be read, for pleasure or for no reason whatsoever, which is to say for a popular audience. But I have the impression that these women whom you mentioned translate because they like what they read, they want other people to read it, and they think there's a popular audience. It may not be a big one, but it's there.

Oshikawa: Yes, we have a popular audience as you say. For instance, some years ago at the Sophia University in Tokyo I had an open lecture on Indonesian literature. The audience was mainly businessmen and housewives, not the university students. In the class, we read Indonesian short stories in original texts. Even after the open lecture was over, about fifteen members of the class still continue the readings regularly. Once a month they have the class, and I also attend. Now we are reading *Tjerita dari Blora*. Before long we'll finish reading all the stories in it. They are my first audience in mind when I translate Pram's works. Pramoedya has fixed readers. But it is a rare case. One trouble we have in translating Indonesian and Southeast Asian literature is that major Japanese publishing companies are not interested in it. For them, Asian literature means only Chinese and Indian literatures. It is our academic tradition too.

Siegel: Are these the same people who will come to the *wayang* tonight? [A Javanese puppeteer was scheduled to perform that evening.]

Oshikawa: Yes. *Wayang* is very popular. We have in Japan a Wayang Society. They regularly perform *wayang*, sometimes in the Japanese language. They are professionals; they go all around Japan and get money from it for living.

Siegel: So *wayang* has a popular audience? Because the same people who would go see a movie would go see *wayang*.

Oshikawa: But I think it is other people who read literature than like *wayang*, which is like popular music or Bali for tourists.

Siegel: Those are four different audiences: One for *wayang*, one for Bali, one for reading, one for music.

Yamashita: The relationship is not clear; it waits for analysis. Recently some popular writers in Japan were interested in Bali; they went to Bali and wrote novels, like Nakajima Ramo and Yoshimoto Banana. I happened to read two novels by these writers and I found them related to "healing." A lot of Japanese are tired, a condition caused by the stress in everyday life, and they found that Bali is a place to get healed. That is one of the reasons a lot of Japanese young women go to Bali.

Siegel: They go to *dukun* [traditional curers].

Yamashita: They go to body spas, maybe they will go to *dukun* too.

Oshikawa: Bali for them is Indonesia. The flight from Narita goes via Jakarta, but . . .

Siegel: They don't get off.

Oshikawa: For them there is no relation with Indonesia.

Siegel: What I don't understand is the connection with healing. This is the first I've heard of it. Of course everyone knows about Bali and tourists, but I've never heard of people going there to get cured.

Yamashita: In the popular women's magazine in Japan, they advertise, "Let's go to Bali to get healed."

Siegel: That's fantastic. So who cures them? Where do they go actually? What places do they go to when they go to Bali to get cured?

Yamashita: [Displaying an ad from women's magazine with the catch phrase, "Let's go overseas in pursuit of being healed: Paradise spa holidays in Bali." The magazine explains how to heal *kokoro* (spirit) and *karada* (body) if you feel tired from busy phones in the office or the crowdedness of the commuter train.] Some of them become repeater tourists. Then some get married with Balinese men. Over these ten years more than three hundred couples got married.

Oshikawa: Among Japanese girls there is a trend for Balinese boys. So there is a lot of information about that. Information about Bali is set in the context of ethnic food or ethnic music.

Yamashita: Some of them perhaps read translations of Oshikawa. In Den Pasar are any of your translations sold? In Jakarta, yes.

Oshikawa: I don't know whether my translations are sold in Bali. One student wrote me a letter after reading *Bumi Manusia* [Pramoedya's *This Earth of Mankind*]. He spoke about a Japanese TV star, Rie Miyazawa, a teenage idol of the '80s. She appeared in TV commercials for a soft drink. Rie Miyazawa, her father is a Dutchman, her mother is Japanese, but divorced. The student thought Rie Miyazawa was the reincarnation of Annalies from *Bumi Manusia*, because Annalies died in the Netherlands and in that TV commercial Rie Miyazawa appeared from a beautiful water and beach. Whether the student is a Bali freak, I don't know.

Yamashita: The younger generation likes to be mysterious.

Siegel: Just to turn back to your translations, to Pramoedya, is it possible for you to say what you like best in Pramoedya's writing?

Oshikawa: For me, the best stories are *Tjerita dari Blora* [Stories from Blora].

Siegel: Yes, exactly.

Oshikawa: "Yang Sudah Hilang" is my favorite because . . .

Siegel: I agree altogether. I translated that also, and I'm thinking now of the difficulty in translating into English the title, "Yang Sudah Hilang," which is the word *hilang* because you could say "disappeared," "vanished," "is no more" and so on. I can't remember what I decided. I have the feeling that it's maybe easier in Japanese. When you think of translating that story, what are some of the difficulties that you come across?

Oshikawa: In translating *Keluarga Gerilya* I had almost no difficulties. It's a problem of language, only language. But *Tjerita dari Blora* is difficult, and *Bumi Manusia* too. I think the difficulties come from the reason it is a collection of stories of the Javanese world. But I think Japanese is more fitting than English, anyway.

Siegel: It's my sense.

Oshikawa: In translating Pramoedya I think Japanese is more fitting.

Siegel: That's my guess also. I'd like to hear you say why you think that.

Oshikawa: It's a Javanese world. . . . My hometown's atmosphere. Well, we have many words to express one concept, one idea, or one feeling. So, for instance, in "Dia Yang Menyerah" [She who Surrendered], the word "*menyerah*" can be translated in many ways, using Japanese words.

Yamashita: What do you mean by "fitting"?

Siegel: I'm not sure that I can follow because I don't know Japanese, but my sense is that, because of the dialects in Japanese and because of the retention of vocabulary, the fact that Japanese is layered, so that older Japanese is very close to new Japanese, that's useful in translating, from the time, especially short stories, especially *Tjerita dari Bora* and *Tjerita dari Djakarta* [Stories from Jakarta], where you feel the interweaving of worlds, and in the Indonesian, you feel the penetration of Javanese, so it's the bringing into Indonesian of something from underneath it. That's very difficult to get in English, but my guess is that it's far easier in Japanese. It's like translating the title of "Yang Sudah Hilang." If you say "vanished," it has a kind of . . . there's already a kind of Victorian feeling to it. That's wrong. Everything else is wrong too.

Oshikawa: If translating in Japanese, I will translate the title as "Ushinawareshi-Mono" in Hiragana [the cursive kana character]. If I use Kanji [Chinese characters in Japanese writing], the meanings are limited. But in Hiragana, the meanings are polyphonic, because Hiragana is after all a sound, a phonetic sign. When we say in Hiragana "*ushinawareshi*," that is "*sudah hilang*," it can be interpreted as "disappeared," "vanished," "lost," "missed," or "dead." The meaning is almost unlimited. "*Mono*," that is "*yang*," also has many meanings. It can be interpreted as "a person," abstract, or concrete, "a thing," "a matter," and so on, just like Indonesian "*yang*" signifies so. By it I mean Japanese is more fitting. In English . . .

Siegel: No, of course, you can say “that which was” but in fact that’s an awkward phrase, and it doesn’t have the same awkwardness in Indonesian.

Yamashita: I have the feeling that the Japanese translators when they translate any language are very passive with the text they translate as compared with English translators. English translators are more aggressive and active in translating the text.

Siegel: Could be. Maybe, I don’t know because in my case, I’ve done a fair amount of translating—I love to translate—I don’t know why I like it so much, but I really like translating. On the other hand, I’m an enormous failure as a translator and the reason is that I can’t keep the languages separate in my mind. I like to translate, because I can hear, especially someone like Pramoedya, I can hear what he’s saying. And I think when I put it in English, “that’s what’s there.” And then a year later I look at it, and it’s terrible. Because I’ve deceived myself; all the time I translate, I deceive myself. But I think if I were Japanese, I would be more successful.

The worse I am in the language, the better I like to translate, because I like to look at the word and puzzle over it. You can almost see the word change from one language to another, and that’s much easier to see, of course, if it doesn’t come right away . . . Well, it’s not about me, this interview.

Yamashita: Oshikawa-san, do you often read Japanese novels?

Siegel: Good question.

Oshikawa: Yes. But when I read Japanese or foreign novels in translation, I always compare, I think about the Japanese language. So recently I can’t read novels smoothly, especially translated literature. It goes very slowly. Because I always think, if I, how I would translate this sentence from English into Japanese. I always think about that. I stop and stop, so it take me hours to read.

Yamashita: Do you have a plan to translate any Japanese novels into Indonesian?

Oshikawa: Yes, but it’s so difficult. If possible, I would like to translate Kenji Nakajami.

Yamashita: Which one?

Oshikawa: Short stories, like “A Nineteen-year-old Boy’s Map.” I never compare literature with literature. I compare translations.

Siegel: You know, the great translator of Chinese into English was Arthur Waley, and that’s exactly what he said about translating Chinese. He never went to China. He refused to go because all he wanted to do was to read Chinese and think about translating it and he said he never wanted to translate anything until he had to. And the “had to,” the “must” of the translation always came from exactly that impulse because he always wanted to know what it would sound like in English. Every time he read a Chinese sentence, he kept thinking, “What’s the English for this?” And finally he would translate it. That’s exactly the same impulse. It’s a special thing to be a translator I think. It’s quite rare to be a good translator.

Oshikawa: When I translate, first I read the Indonesian sentence two or three times, then I translate it into Japanese. I read the Japanese sentence two or three times. Now I use a computer. After one month, I read it once again, and then I read silently so I’m

always thinking about translation. Today on the train from my house, in my head are some sentences; how to translate them. Some sentences are always in my head, short sentences, or one word or two words.

Siegel: Extraordinary, but I can recognize it. When are you satisfied?

Oshikawa: I read in Japanese. I hear my Japanese in my own ears. If the Japanese is good, I am satisfied. But I never want to read my Japanese after it is published in a book form.

Siegel: By that time you've forgotten the Indonesian. At that time, when you say the Japanese is fluent, can you still hear the Indonesian?

Oshikawa: Yes.

Siegel: Yes? Okay. You're a lucky man. You remember the Indonesian when you read the Japanese?

Oshikawa: Yes.

Siegel: You're a good translator. Well, that's as good as you can come. If you can make the language disappear, it's a failure. The thing is that translation always has to be unsuccessful because if the original is still there, it means it's not entirely in Japanese. On the other hand, if the original isn't there, then it's not a translation, it's Japanese. The translation has replaced the original. So it's not possible to translate. . . . I have one question. What do you think about the English translation of Pramoedya? I myself think that the appreciation of him is limited in important ways because of the poorness of the translations. It's also true, you know, there's nobody [no English translator of Indonesian] just like you whose whole life is translation, who is by their very personality a translator, or who develops a skill to fit a personality. I don't know anybody quite like that in America. I think that Henk Maier is something like that in Holland. I think his translations in Dutch are very good. Do you know him—Henk Maier? I also think that Indonesian literature isn't very good as a whole. I think Pramoedya is a real exception. Therefore you don't have a group of people working together as a group on translations of Indonesian, as you do have, for instance, around Spanish literature, in America. And on the other hand, you don't have personalities like yourself. And why that's true I don't know. It may be that America doesn't produce such people . . . People who are compelled to translate are rare.

Oshikawa: This is my impression, too. English is a universal language and Indonesian is a local language. So when they translate from local language into a universal language, they can manipulate. They automatically shortcut.

Siegel: Or whatever, Because English itself is the standard, so whatever is in English is right.

Yamashita: So that's why I say English translators are aggressive. They are like colonizers.

Translations by Noriaki Oshikawa

Books

- Tan Malaka. *Massa-aksi and Menuju Ke Republik Indonesia*. Tokyo: Rokusaisha, 1975.
- Tan Malaka. *Dari Penjara Ke Penjara*, vol. 1. Tokyo: Rokusaisha, 1979.
- Mochtar Lubis. *Jalan Tak Ada Ujung*. Tokyo: Mekong Publishing Co., 1980.
- Tan Malaka. *Dari Penjara Ke Penjara*, vol. 2. Tokyo: Rokusaisha, 1981.
- Pramoedya Ananta Toer. *Keluarga Gerilya*. Tokyo: Mekong Publishing Co., 1983.
- Pramoedya Ananta Toer. *Bumi Manusia*. Tokyo: Mekong Publishing Co., 1986.
- Pramoedya Ananta Toer. *Anak Semua Bangsa*. Tokyo: Mekong Publishing Co., 1988.
- Yudhistira ANM Massardi. *Arjuna Mencari Cinta*. Tokyo: Mekong Publishing Co., 1992.
- Yudhistira ANM Massardi. *Arjuna Mencari Cinta; Arjuna Drop Out*. Tokyo: Mekong Publishing Co., 1995.
- Pramoedya Ananta Toer. *Jejak Langkah*. Tokyo: Mekong Publishing Co., forthcoming.

Contributions to Anthologies

- Idrus, "Surabaya," in *The Collection of Indonesian Short Stories*, ed. Goenawan Mohamad and Ignas Kleden, supervised for translation by Shigetsugu Sasaki. Tokyo: Imura-bunka-jigyosha, 1983.

Contributions to Literary Magazines and Journals

- Putu Wijaya, "Dompét," *Subaru* (1988 September).
- Budi Darma, "Keluarga M," *Wasedabungaku* (1989 June).
- Seno Gumira Ajidarma, "Misteri Kota Ningih," "Telenga," "Saksi Mata," *Gunzo* (1997 November).
- Pramoedya Ananta Toer, ed., a translated portion of "Mencari Jejak Para Perawan Yang Digondol Jepang; 1942-1945," in *Senso Sekinin Kenkyu* [The Report on Japan's War Responsibility]. Tokyo: Center for Research and Documentation on Japan's War Responsibility, no. 16, 1997.

